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ABSTRACT

The view that child maltreatment is the result of a breakdown in normal family communication processes suggests that difficulties in verbal interaction may be found in nearly all interactions between maltreating parents and their children. To explore this possibility, a comparative study was made of the conversations of maltreating mothers and children and non-maltreating mothers and children. It was hypothesized that the usual constraints of listener upon speaker, where speaker's utterances tend to reflect listener's positive response, would be different in maltreating and control dyads. Compared to non-maltreating pairs, maltreating pairs were expected to exhibit less cohesion in their discourse, more instances of aggravated forms of utterances, and fewer instances of mitigated forms of utterances. Conversations between 19 pairs of parent perpetrators of abuse or neglect and their children, and 19 control pairs matched for children's age, sex, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity were videotaped in a 15-minute standard laboratory situation. The videotapes were coded blind by two coders from audiotapes and typed transcripts. Results of the discourse analysis indicated that maltreating pairs, overall, used more aggravated and fewer mitigated utterances than control pairs. Some indication was found that the conversations of maltreating pairs were less cohesive. Such differences were more pronounced for mothers than for their children. (Author/RH)

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A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN MALTREATED CHILDREN AND THEIR MOTHERS: FINAL REPORT.

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ABSTRACT

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VIEWING CHILD MALTREATMENT AS THE OUTCOME OF A BREAKDOWN IN THE NORMAL COMMUNICATION PROCESSES BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN SUGGESTS THAT THE DIFFICULTIES IN THEIR VERBAL INTERACTION ARE PERVASIVE AND, AS SUCH, CAN BE FOUND IN PRACTICALLY ALL OF THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH EACH OTHER.

IT WAS HYPOTHESIZED THAT THE USUAL CONSTRAINTS OF THE LISTENER UPON THE SPEAKER, WHERE THE SPEAKER'S UTTERANCES TEND TO REFLECT THE LISTENER'S POSITIVE RESPONSE, WOULD BE DIFFERENT IN MALTREATING AND CONTROL PAIRS OF MOTHERS AND CHILDREN. THIS WAS EXPECTED TO RESULT IN LESS COHESION IN THE DISCOURSE OF MALTREATED PAIRS AND IN DIFFERENCES IN VALENCE, THAT IS, IN MORE INSTANCES OF AGGRAVATED, AND FEWER INSTANCES OF MITIGATED, FORMS OF UTTERANCES.

CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN 19 PAIRS OF PARENT PERPETRATORS OF ABUSE OR NEGLECT AND THEIR CHILDREN AND 19 CONTROL PAIRS MATCHED FOR THE CHILDREN'S AGE, SEX, SES, AND ETHNIC GROUP WERE VIDEOTAPED IN A 15-MINUTE STANDARD LABORATORY SITUATION AND CODED BLIND BY TWO CODERS FROM AUDIOTAPES AND TYPED TRANSCRIPTS.

RESULTS INDICATED THAT MALTREATMENT PAIRS OVERALL USED MORE AGGRAVATED AND FEWER MITIGATED UTTERANCES THAN CONTROL PAIRS. THERE WAS ALSO SOME INDICATION THAT THE CONVERSATIONS OF MALTREATMENT PAIRS WERE LESS COHESIVE. THESE DIFFERENCES WERE MORE PRONOUNCED FOR THE MOTHERS THAN FOR THEIR CHILDREN.

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INTRODUCTION AND HYPOTHESES

In order to formulate effective intervention programs for improving the communication between maltreated children and their mothers, precise descriptions of those aspects of their conversation which differentiate them from matched non-maltreating control pairs are needed.

The present study carried out a discourse analysis of the conversation between maltreating and non-maltreating mother-child pairs.

It was expected that, relative to control pairs:

1. Conversational cohesion of maltreating pairs would be less,

2. Aggravated forms of utterances would be more frequent,

3. Mitigated forms of utterances would be less frequent, and

4. The speech of maltreated children would be somewhat less disturbed than that of their mothers.

METHOD

SUBJECTS 19 PAIRS OF MALTREATING MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN, CONSISTING OF ABUSE (N=6) OR NEGLECT (N=11) OR BOTH ABUSE AND NEGLECT (N=2) REFERRED BY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES TO A HOSPITAL-BASED FAMILY CRISIS PROGRAM.

19 CONTROL PAIRS MATCHED FOR CHILDREN'S AGE (4-16), SEX (TOTAL: 16M, 22F), SES (HOLLINGSHEAD 1-5) AND ETHNIC GROUP.

PROCEDURE MOTHER & CHILD PAIRS WERE VIDEOTAPED FOR 15 MINUTES WHILE THEY PLAYED A GAME TOGETHER IN A ROOM BY THEMSELVES.

CODING TYPED TRANSCRIPTS AND AUDIOTAPES WERE CODED BLIND BY TWO CODERS. RESULTS ARE BASED ON CONSENSUS CODING BY BOTH CODERS. RELIABILITY ESTIMATES FOR 12 CONVERSATIONS WERE .88 OVERALL AND RANGED FROM .65 TO .97 FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF CODING CATEGORIES.

EACH OF THE UTTERANCES OF THE MOTHER & THE CHILD WERE CODED SEPARATELY FOR:

1. STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL TYPE [BID (MAND); RESPONSE; MIXED UTTERANCE (RESPONSE PLUS BID); AND COMMENT]
2. VALENCE [AGGRAVATED; MITIGATED; NEUTRAL] ON AN AGGRAVATION-MITIGATION DIMENSION, ACCORDING TO 52 SPECIFIC CATEGORIES.
3. DISCONTINUITIES OF TOPIC
4. INTERRUPTIONS
5. DISAGREEMENTS

RESULTS

1. Maltreating mothers used significantly more aggravated utterances - bids, responses, mixed responses and bids, and comments than control mothers, whereas control mothers used significantly more mitigated utterances than maltreating mothers. (See Figure 1)

2. Maltreated children used significantly more aggravated utterances than control children. (See Figure 1)

3. Maltreating pairs had significantly more disagreements than control pairs (See Figure 6) and their disagreements were significantly more often aggravated, whereas disagreements between control mothers and their children were significantly more often mitigated. (See Figure 2)

4. Maltreating mothers and children used different forms than control mothers and children to mitigate and aggravate their utterances. (See Table 1)

5. Although control mothers and children maintained the same level of aggravation following aggravated or mitigated utterances, maltreating mothers and children used significantly more aggravated utterances than expected following aggravated utterances. Both groups used more mitigated utterances following mitigated utterances. (See Figures 3 & 4)

6. Although the distribution of structural-functional forms was essentially the same for both groups of mothers, both the maltreating mothers and their children showed less cohesiveness in their conversation than the control mothers and children. (See Figures 5 and 6).

CONCLUSIONS

1. THE CONVERSATIONS OF MALTREATING MOTHERS AND CHILDREN CAN BE RELIABLY DIFFERENTIATED FROM THOSE OF NORMAL PAIRS BY A DIMENSION OF AGGRAVATION-MITIGATION.

2. THIS DIFFERENCE IS ESPECIALLY PRONOUNCED DURING DISAGREEMENTS, WHICH, IF TAKEN AS AN ANALOGUE OF THE MORE EXACERBATED CIRCUMSTANCES THAT ARE CHARACTERISTIC OF ABUSIVE HOUSEHOLDS, SUGGESTS THAT ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO OCCUR AS A REACTION TO STRESS IN SUCH HOUSEHOLDS.

3. DIFFERENT TYPES OF MITIGATION AND AGGRAVATION ARE USED BY MALTREATING AND CONTROL MOTHERS AND CHILDREN.

4. MALTREATING MOTHERS AND CHILDREN RESPOND TO EACH OTHER WITH MORE AGGRAVATED REMARKS THAN EXPECTED GIVEN EVEN SLIGHTLY PROVOCATIVE STIMULI, WHEREAS CONTROL MOTHERS AND CHILDREN MAINTAIN A LOW LEVEL OF AGGRAVATION DESPITE THE STIMULI THEY PROVIDE EACH OTHER.

5. CONVERSATIONAL COHESION IS SOMEWHAT LESS FOR THE MALTREATMENT PAIRS OF MOTHERS AND CHILDREN.

6. MALTREATING MOTHERS SHOWED SOMEWHAT MORE COMMUNICATIVE DISTURBANCE THAN THEIR CHILDREN, SUGGESTING THAT INTERVENTION WITH THE CHILDREN MIGHT CONCEIVABLY MEET WITH MORE SUCCESS.

TABLE 1

Aggravated And Mitigated Utterances Used Significantly More Often By Maltreating And Control Mothers And Children

Aggravated Utterances:	
Reiterating a bid more than twice in a row**	Maltreating Mothers
Insistence**	" "
Refusal without a reason*	" "
Impolite disagreement*	" "
Threats or ultimatums**	" "
Negative tags*	" "
Irritation & anger**	" "
Impatience**	" "
Devaluing other person**	" "
Question anticipating disagreement*	" "
Sarcasm**	" "
Scepticism**	" "
Insults**	" "
Negative teasing, provocative remark, or defiance*	" "
Not allowing hearer to answer question**	Control Mothers
Impatience*	Maltreated Children
Insults**	" "
Negative teasing provocative remark, or defiance**	" "
Ignoring or not answering a question**	Control Children
Mitigated Utterances:	
Tag utterances*	Maltreating Mothers
Enlisting attention*	Control Mothers
Enlisting cooperation**	" "
Polite or justified commands*	Control Children

** $p<.05$
* $.05<p<.10$

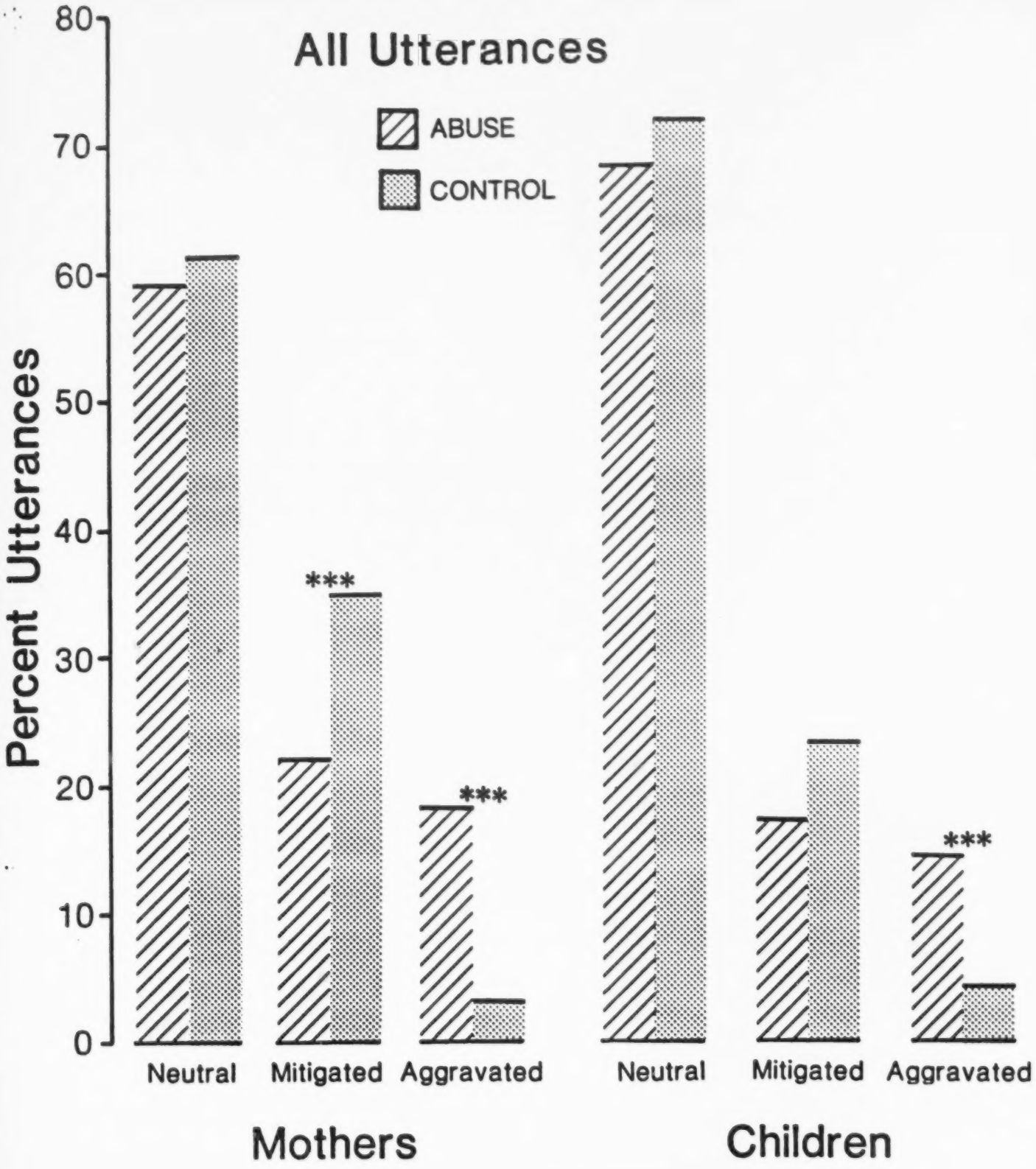
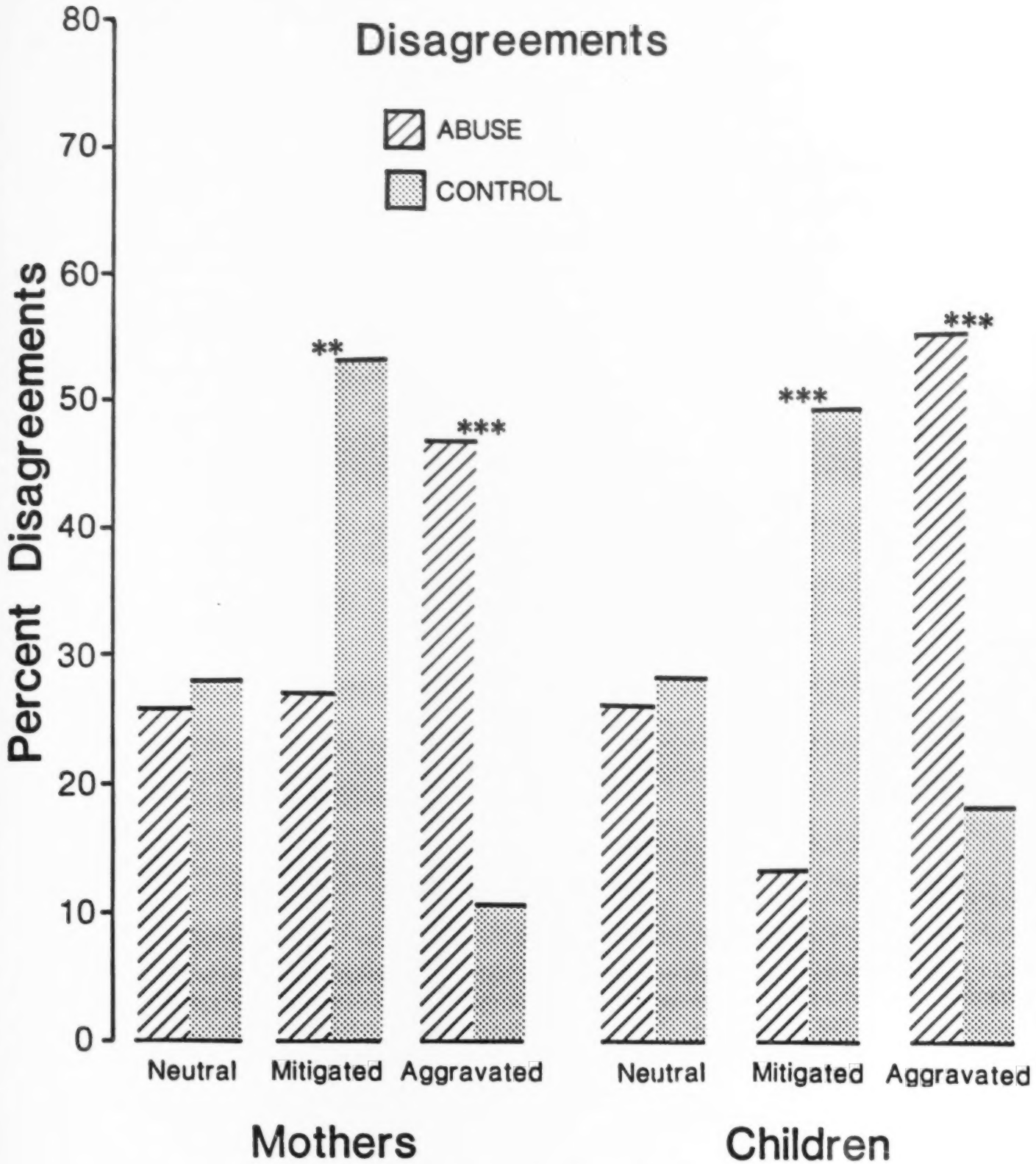

All Utterances
ABUSE
CONTROL
Percent Utterances
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
***
***
***
Neutral
Mitigated
Aggravated
Neutral
Mitigated
Aggravated
Mothers
Children
*p≤.05 **p≤.01 ***p≤.005

Figure 1



*p≤.05 **p≤.01 ***p≤.005

Figure 2

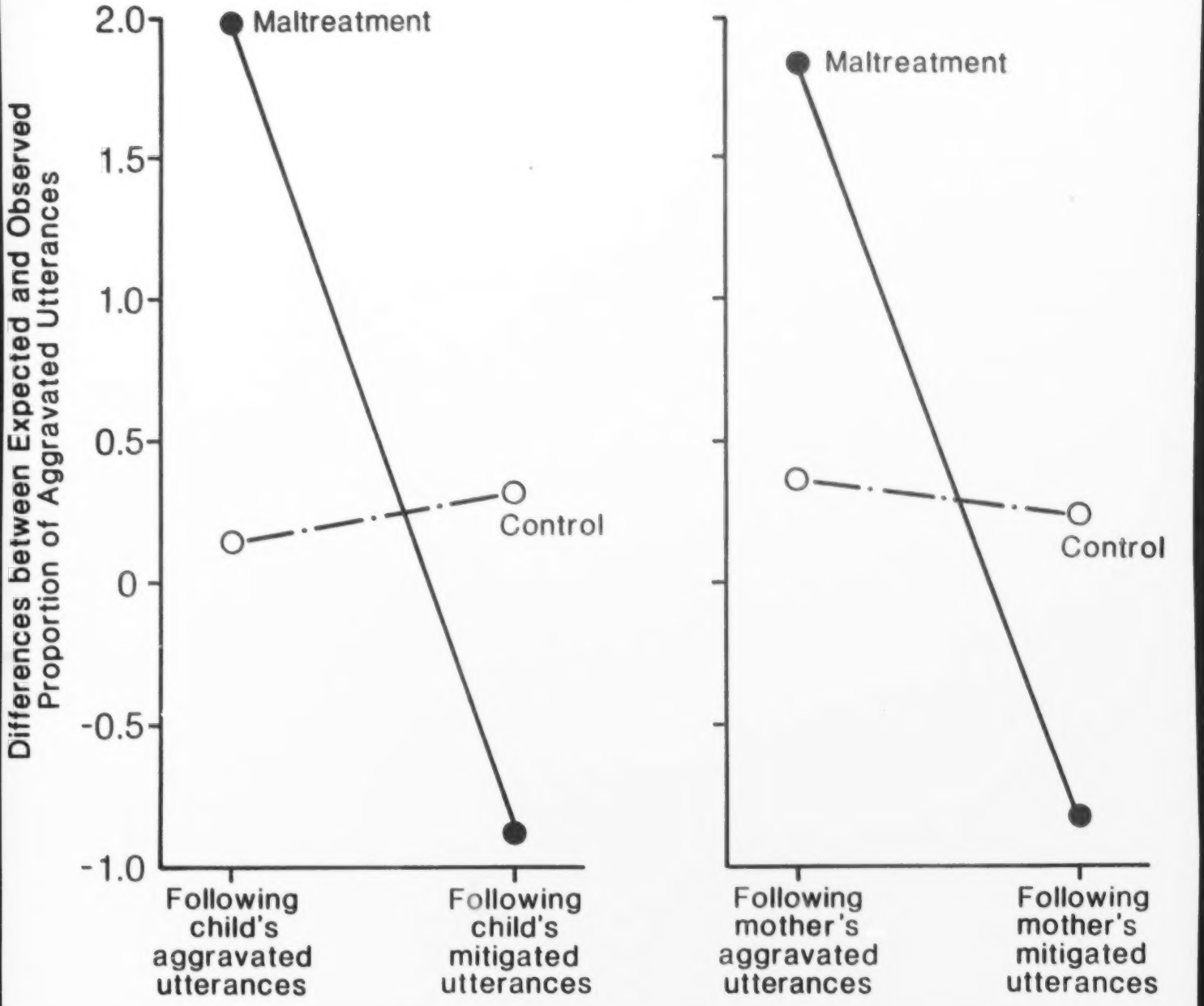

Differences between Expected and Observed Proportion of Aggravated Utterances
2.0
1.5
1.0
0.5
0
-0.5
-1.0
Maltreatment
Control
Following child's aggravated utterances
Following child's mitigated utterances
Mothers' Aggravated Utterances
Maltreatment
Control
Following mother's aggravated utterances
Following mother's mitigated utterances
Children's Aggravated Utterances

Figure 3

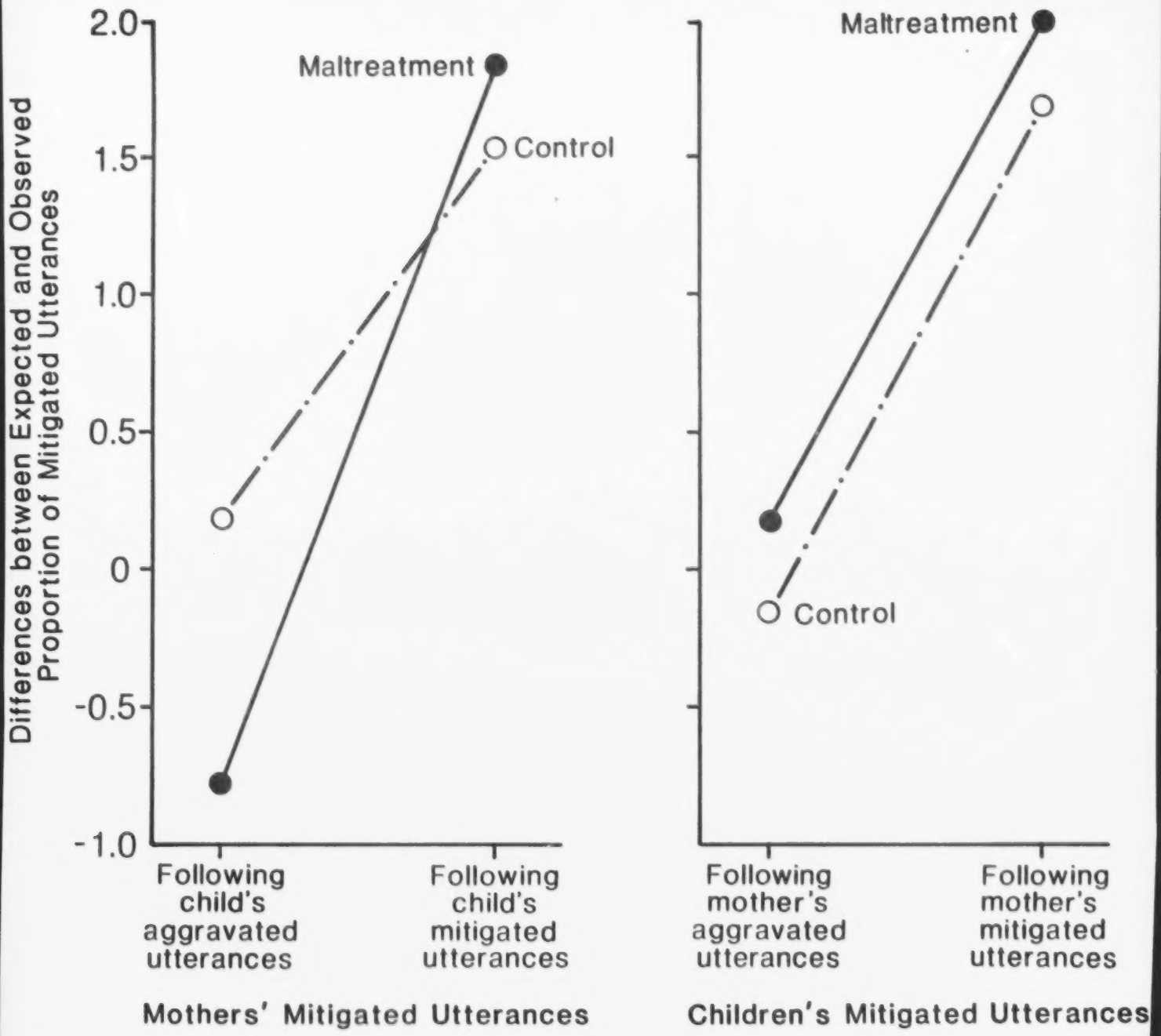

Differences between Expected and Observed Proportion of Mitigated Utterances
2.0
1.5
1.0
0.5
0
-0.5
-1.0
Maltreatment
Control
Following child's aggravated utterances
Following child's mitigated utterances
Mothers' Mitigated Utterances
Maltreatment
Control
Following mother's aggravated utterances
Following mother's mitigated utterances
Children's Mitigated Utterances

 Figure 4

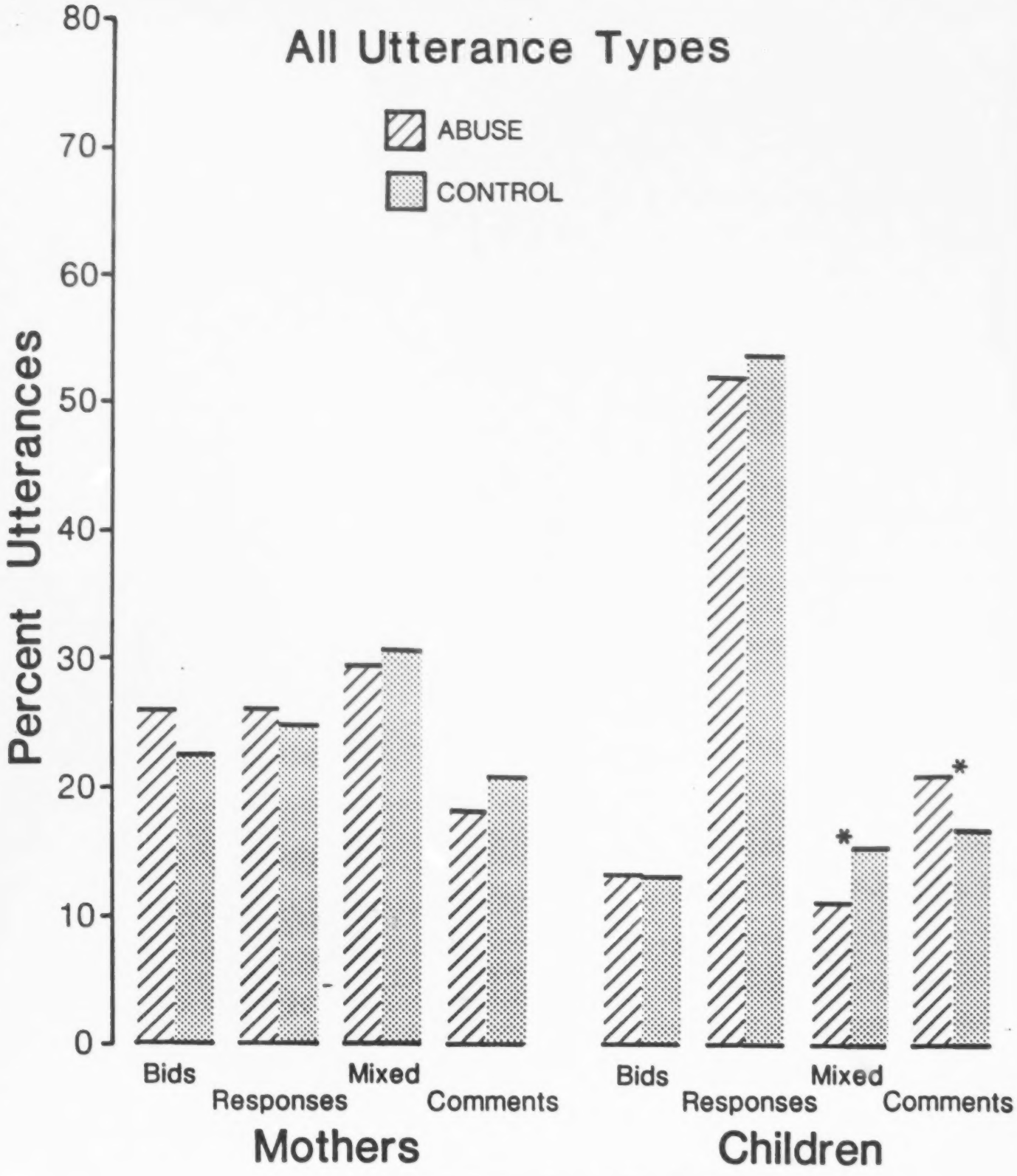

All Utterance Types
ABUSE
CONTROL
Percent Utterances
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Bids
Responses
Mixed
Comments
Bids
Responses
Mixed
Comments
Mothers
Children
*
*
*
*p≤.05 **p≤.01 ***p≤.005

Figure 5

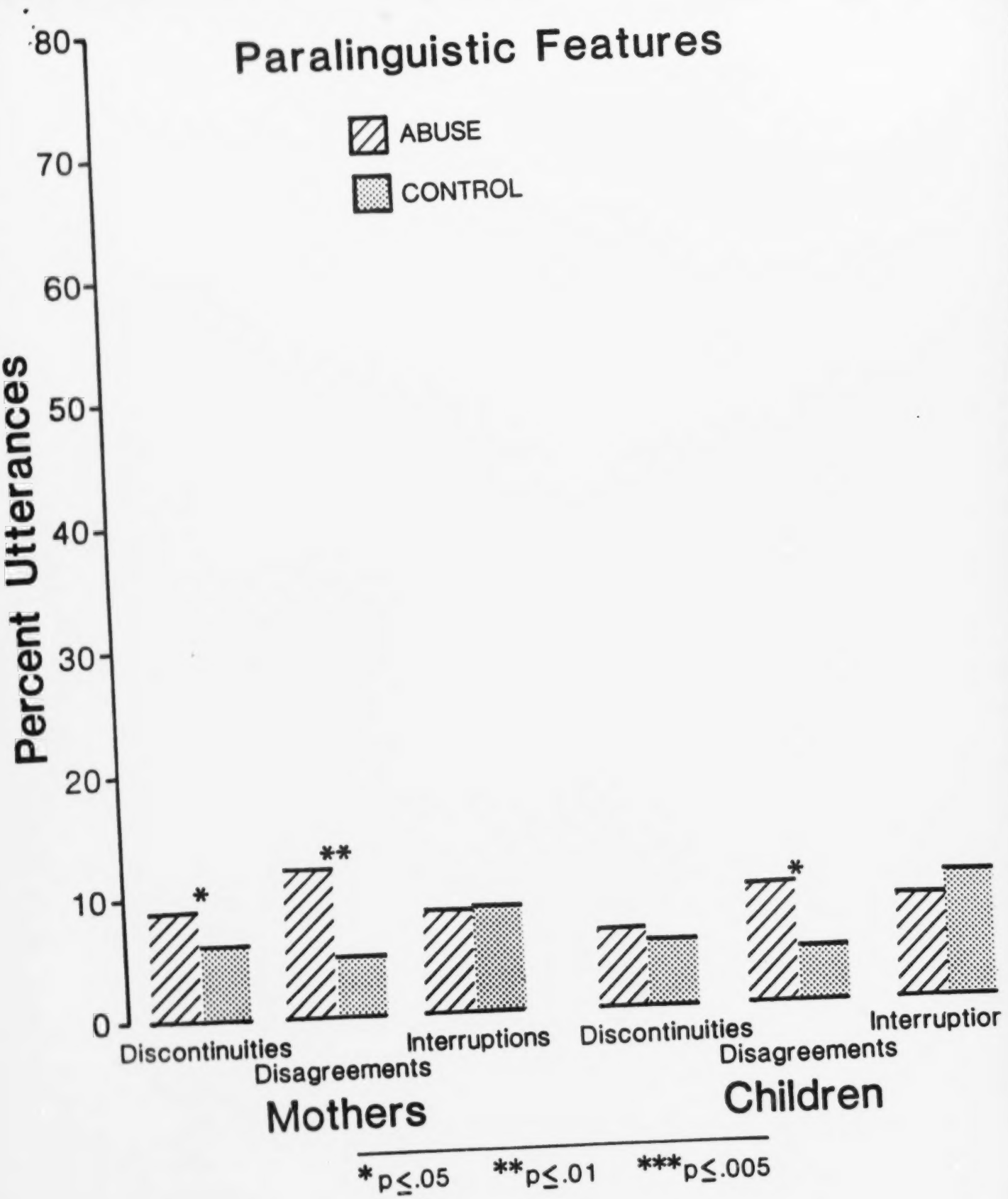

Paralinguistic Features
ABUSE
CONTROL
Percent Utterances
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
*
**
*
Discontinuities
Disagreements
Interruptions
Discontinuities
Disagreements
Interruptior
Mothers
Children
*p≤.05 **p≤.01 ***p≤.005

Figure 6